

THE HISTORY OF WILDBAD KREUTH

From a Fountain of Health
to a Centre of Political Studies



In the picturesque landscape of the Tegernsee Valley, the community of Kreuth hides an especially precious jewel in the form of a health resort nestled at the foot of the impressive rock formation in the blue mountains. Here the visitor will experience what the health resort has always asserted: whoever takes a walk on the incredibly beautiful meadow plateau in this wooded area encircled by mountains, will feel with each breath the spicy, oxygenated air of the forest and will relax and recuperate in the delightful quiet of this mountainous seclusion. This salutary effect is enhanced by the beneficial effects of the sulphur springs that have existed at this location since time immemorial. They arise at the “Hohlenstein” nearby which significantly was known at one time as the sulphur rock, clearly testifying to its sulphur content. In 1490 the spa, originally known as “Saint Leonhard”, was renamed Kreuth and in 1498 Peter von Riedlern, a serf of the Tegernsee monastery, was named spa director.

Abbot Henry V of Tegernsee built a bathhouse in 1511. His spa director was Hansen Reiffenstuel from Egern. Hans Poettinger, the 19th century chronicler of Tegernsee, mentions in his historical notes a lease that dates back to the year 1566. According to the lease, “the spa director is obligated to loyally attend to the rich and poor who visit and wish to use the baths and provide them with what they require, and to ensure that there be no malicious gossip. Moreover, he is entitled to charge a bathing fee of three Kreuzer (old German currency equal to 1.80 Euro-Cent) per day including the night, and is himself to make whatever repairs are required. If the gentleman from Tegernsee (meaning the abbot) or his brother desire to use the baths, he is to receive no fee. Furthermore, the conduct of the spa director towards visitors should at all times be reputable in every respect.” In the course of time, the spa director came to be a well-known person of distinction who was held in high esteem by the populace and even had representational duties. It was he who in earlier times had to provide support and instruct visitors on how to do things at the resort. It was also he who welcomed the visitors, provided them with food and saw them off. To sum it all up, he was spa superintendent, restaurateur, physician, pharmacist, herb gatherer and administrator, all in one and the same person.

Abbot Bernhard Wenzl, an avid builder, erected a new building in 1661. After this went up in flames, a new bathhouse was built under the direction of Abbot Quirin IV Millon in 1696, in addition to a charming Chapel to the Holy Cross. This is situated so that the oratorium is integrated into the church nave and located on the first floor of the rustic house and bathhouse. The large crucifix with freely suspended angels catching the blood of Christ, as well as the figures depicting the Blessed Virgin, St. John and Mary Magdalene are all well worth seeing. Another piece of decoration in the nave is a valuable Dutch wood relief that depicts the resurrection of Christ. Worked into the wood is the tip of a lance with an elegant baroque mount, known as the “Holy Lance”, which is said to have come into contact with the Holy Lance in Santa Croce in Rome.

This bathhouse, known as the “old bathhouse”, resembles a Tegernsee farmhouse. Together with the Chapel to the Holy Cross attached to it, it forms a graceful set of buildings that is very popular with friends of folk culture today. There is another bathhouse next to it which dates back to the year 1706, built by Abbot Quirin IV as well. The Tegernsee abbots had the “St. Leonhard” baths in their possession for three hundred years – until the era of secularisation.

In 1803 the then spa director, Simon Zahler, purchased the house, chapel and bathhouse as well as the farmland for 500 guilders (1 gilder = Euro 1.07) on the condition that the respective owner never relinquish the bathing facilities. The baths, bathhouse and property belonging to it had been sadly neglected, but was now about to take a new upturn. On August 20, 1818, the descendants of Simon Zahler sold the entire complex to King Max Joseph I of Bavaria (1756–1825) for 16,000 guilders.

The widow, Magdalene Zahler, had to pay the maintenance of the common bathing facility and the agricultural property until the end of the year at her own expense. The king then built a long double-winged bathing facility including all the outbuildings during the period from 1818 to 1820. (It is quite likely that Klenze was the architect.)

A small booklet dated 1853 puts it this way: “The buildings of the sanatorium consist of two fairly large wings connected by a corridor which enters

into the large assembly room with an entrance hall supported by columns, as well as the necessary annexes, stables, carriage houses etc. The furnishings, the living room, the two spacious dining rooms, the parlour, the billiard room, the bathroom, etc. are all exemplary. Everywhere comfortable elegance has been provided for, order and cleanliness are visible throughout.”

In addition to the splendid mountain scenery, it was initially the sulphur springs that tipped the scales in favour of the new spa. It is reported: “The mineral springs bring about therapeutic effects in many different applications, viz. for diseases involving kidney and bladder stones, chronic gout and rheumatism, liver complaints, pallor, etc.” Whey treatment as was practised in Switzerland was introduced in 1822.

“Whey, especially goat whey, is one of the greatest naturally occurring remedies”, a statement attributed to Dr. Tiscont, has been confirmed by many physicians. In most cases, the whey acts to reduce stress, is nutritious and provides strength in cases involving intestinal, urinary and dermatological disorders, in nervous diseases, in diseases of the respiratory organs and for consumption. “Goat whey, a fairly clear, yellow-greenish, translucent liquid with a sweetish, aromatic taste, was prepared in Siebenhuetten for the baths on the Koenigsalm and Geissalm. It was brought to the baths every morning where it was drunk from attractive, individual whey cups (exhibited in the local heritage museum in Tegernsee) in the whey hall in accordance with the doctor’s prescription. In addition, the whey health cure in combination with alpine herb juices, when taken as a course of treatment, produced a variety of therapeutic effects” (from the “Manual of Health Springs and Whey Cure Sanatoria” by Dr. A. Kraemer, 1850).

Finally, Max Joseph established a foundation in the amount of 50,000 guilders in favour of the needy to allow them to use the baths and take the cures free of charge. “Persons known as free bathers came twice a year before and after the actual peak season for guests. They lived in the rooms of the rich, sat at the same tables and listened to the same spa concerts that the rich Russians and Hanseatic merchants enjoyed.”

As an expression of the gratitude felt for the many good deeds done by the noble monarch, a royal monument was erected in 1828 above a spring in the forest near the “Old Bath”, a bit to one side of the Kiem-Pauli path. The elegant memorial is a bust of Max Joseph above a memorial plaque depicting patients hoping to cure themselves at the spring. The inscription reads: “His life was as pure and full of blessings as this spring.”

King Max Joseph I brought the great era of the Wittelsbacher family of Tegernsee with him into the quiet locality of Kreuth. The notables of the world came to visit, crowned heads such as Emperor Franz of Austria, the Russian Czars Nicholas I and Alexander I together with a large entourage, as well as uncrowned persons of prominence and high ranking gave Wildbad Kreuth an international reputation. A stay at the health resort, hunting, merry festivities with dancing, singing and yodelling filled the days of the stay. Hans Maier (1876–1942), editor of the “Münchner Zeitung” and himself from Rottach, described life in those days: “As a child I experienced the last of the Golden Era. The noises of the chamois hunt still ring in my ears. I hear the horses snorting and the silver harnesses jingling. That was Duke Max who charged past in the four-in-hand. I can still see good old Emperor Franz arriving with a group of gentlemen, all of whom are adorned with exact imitations of his majesty’s beard. A piece of Grand old Austria is conserved in my youth.”

Max Joseph died in Munich on October 12, 1825. Dowager queen Caroline (1776–1841), Prince Carl of Bavaria (1795–1857), Duke Carl Theodor of Bavaria (1839–1909) and his wife, Duchess Maria José (1857–1943), continued to promote the reputation and importance of Wildbad Kreuth. The dowager queen was always at pains to preserve and improve the baths, particularly the style of living and care of the guests. “The more congenial half of her life belonged to Tegernsee and Bad Kreuth.” After her death in 1841, Prince Carl of Bavaria inherited not only the entire estate at Tegernsee, but also, in addition to all of this wealth, the generosity and openhandedness of this father, Max Joseph. He created a separate office to systematically provide support to the needy. This had a very beneficial effect on Bad Kreuth as well. Prince Carl was emotionally warm-

hearted and sympathetic to the sick and suffering from Bad Kreuth when he encountered them during his walks. As a result, he increased the number of free passes to fifty-one. "They too are my guests", he would say frequently to his servants and staff. Prince Carl died on August 15, 1875 while riding back to Tegernsee Castle when his horse lost his footing and stumbled and Prince Carl was thrown.

Prince Carl's nephew, Duke Carl Theodor, inherited the estate. Once again, a fortunate Wittelsbacher succession was auspicious for Wildbad Kreuth. Carl Theodor, a famous eye specialist who performed cataract surgery on more than a thousand patients with the assistance of his lovely wife, Maria José, was a researcher, advisor, benefactor, and philanthropist par excellence. Countless healings took place in Tegernsee and Bad Kreuth. Both the duke and duchess were devoted to Bad Kreuth in every respect. It remained the select facility for healing, recuperation and recreation for both rich and poor. There are many elderly persons in and around Tegernsee who lived through this ducal era and experienced the many good deeds that were done. They still tell stories of the magnificent four-in-hand, with which their Royal Highnesses travelled through the valley, of the festivities and the concerts that took place in the whey-drinking hall of the spa.

"Carl Theodor was a hunter who owned a hunting ground. He was also an expert who kept a watchful eye on the number of game, the hunting personnel, the number of game shot, the hunting areas and the hunting lodges."

These were the traits and qualities of the "hunter", together with all the other charitable virtues that he passed on to his son, Duke Ludwig Wilhelm, who succeeded to the title after the death of the duchess in 1943. As great and exemplary as his endeavours for Wildbad Kreuth and its guests were, it did not prevent the facility from suffering during the war and from being virtually destroyed at the end of the war. In the night of May 4, 1945, the American troops set fire to the ducal home, demolishing not only it but all the belongings of his hunter, Carl Voegele, as well. At the end of the war everything that was not nailed or screwed down had been robbed and plundered.

After renewed beginnings, Ludwig Wilhelm was able to renovate the bathhouse in 1956/57 and reorganise it into a first-rate sanatorium featuring all the modern medical equipment of the time. Ludwig Wilhelm, the then head of the ducal house of Wittelsbach, died on November 5, 1968. He was one of the most highly respected and most prominent public figures not only in Tegernsee but also far into the recesses of Bavaria. He was regarded as one of the best experts and champions of hunting and forestry. His important book entitled "Hunting in the Mountains" had to be reprinted over and over again. He inherited from his grandfather, Duke Max, his understanding and love of folk music, folk song, national costumes and folk customs. He was a great patron of Kiem Pauli who studied folk songs and who was allowed to spend decades living and working in Bad Kreuth until his death in 1960. Ludwig Wilhelm and Ludwig Thoma were closely linked by ties of friendship.

With the consecration of the duke in the crypt of the Schlosskirche (royal chapel) in Tegernsee, the Tegernsee region, the "Duchy" of Kreuth, as it was often called, lost one of its most avid and invaluable guardians. The successor to the property, Max Emanuel, Duke of Bavaria, closed the sanatorium and spa rooms in 1973. After the rueful end of an era spanning four hundred years in Wildbad Kreuth, the intellectual spring will now surge forth to teach political science to politically aware citizens.

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BNr: 0174-1407